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SUBJECT: SOUTHWEST BANGLADESH: SECURITY AND THE 2006-07
ELECTION

REF: DHAKA 3321

¶1. Summary: PolOff and PolFSN recently visited the Southwestern area of Bangladesh, which for over thirty years has seen some of the worst ultra-Maoists violence and where numerous atrocities were committed against minorities during the 2001 election. While civil society expressed concern about the possibility of violence during the upcoming election cycle, political leaders denied any significant communal tensions and local people were unconcerned about an election they saw as far distant. The government has improved the local law and order situation over the last five years, making economic and environmental issues the current biggest concerns. END SUMMARY.

¶2. PolOff and PolFSN visited the southwestern districts of Jessore, Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Golpanganj from May 30 through June 1 to get local input on the upcoming elections, communal relations, and other issues of concern to the local population. Local political and law enforcement leaders welcomed the visit as an opportunity to showcase a positive local situation.

Peaceful Contrast to 2001 Elections

¶3. The southwestern region of Bangladesh has been prone to political violence since the country's founding, especially from ultra-Maoist groups. This traditionally pro Awami League region also witnessed significant election related violence during and immediately following the 2001 elections.

¶4. PolOff and PolFSN visited several sites of past violence, including a Catholic church in Baniarchar where in 2000, ten people were killed during a bomb blast and a Hindu farm where a local AL leader was killed and female members of his family raped shortly after the 2001 elections. Given the history of violence against minorities in this region, Poloff and PolFSN also visited numerous area Hindu and Christian villages.

¶5. Residents at all these sites expressed little fear of the upcoming elections. Christians and Hindus said they enjoyed relatively peaceful relations with their Muslim neighbors. The Hindu family in Bagherhat said they believe the attack on their family was personally, not politically motivated, and the BNP government has posted police protection at their home constantly since the attack. The leaders of the bombed Church are convinced that "Bangla Bhai" is responsible for that attack. Now that he has been arrested, they feel their relations with the neighboring Hindu and Muslims communities are peaceful, and there is little reason to fear violence as the election season

progresses.

NGOs Concerned and Nervous

¶6. Civil society NGO's expressed a higher level of concern to us. Leaders of Uttoron and Rupantor, two large NGOs in Khulna, said the minority communities in their service area are beginning to feel "shaky." Rupantor claims minorities were scared by local gangs into voting for fundamentalist candidates in 2001 and could again be targets of intimidation. Uttoron says there are patterns of discrimination in the voter rolls and minorities are not getting enumerated. Most NGO's believe areas not visited by enumerators were overlooked not because of malfeasance but rather due to enumerator incompetence.

¶7. In Jessore, there was evidence of some of the pressure minority groups and NGO's are facing. At the first NGO visited, Banchte Shekka, there was an open discussion about the upcoming elections and discussion of their programs. This was in marked contrast to our visit to Rights Jessore, an NGO particularly known for anti-trafficking activities. (Jessore is the closest city to Benapole, the largest land border crossing in Bangladesh.) Our scheduled visit with the NGO's executive director and two junior staff members was short and no substantive information was exchanged.

¶8. A call to the executive director later in the day confirmed our suspicions: one of the "junior staff members" was an officer from the Director General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). The executive director asked to meet us at our hotel, where he claimed that the four-party alliance will lose three or four of its current six southwestern

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parliamentary seats in a free and fair election, but that the MP from Jessore -- the current Environment and Forestry minister -- would use his ties to illegal organizations to intimidate local minority voters.

Residents Praise Improved Law and Order Situation

¶9. The consensus from residents spoken to on this trip was that law and order had improved dramatically in the last four years. Residents of small villages, business leaders in Khulna, and even NGO leaders talked about the ultra-Maoists gangs that have operated there for over 30 years. These gangs, an offshoot of the Naxalites of West Bengal, engaged in theft, extortion, assault and murder with little interference from local government. In 2001, for the first time, the vast majority of the Southwest voted for the BNP and Jamaat Islami, in hopes that they would succeed where other governments had failed in stopping these criminal activities.

¶10. Residents say that through Operation Clean Heart, use of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and other police activity, the security situation has dramatically improved. Business is again growing, people are less afraid to participate in activities after dark, and the murder and violent crime rates have dropped significantly. Civil society rightly protests the extra-judicial killings, torture, and other human rights abuses committed by RAB. Ordinary residents, however, appear confident that RAB and the police were targeting genuine "bad guys" and were not a threat to society at large.

Everyday Concerns, Environment Uppermost

¶11. Since most people seem unconcerned about violence or the elections, PolOff and FSN asked what the biggest problems the area faced were. Villagers in all areas talked about the rising prices of food, petroleum products and other essential

commodities. There were also specific local concerns, primarily around the larger cities.

¶12. In Jessore, we heard about "water logging" caused by a government sponsored engineering project. In an effort to reduce the damage from seasonal flooding, the government has constructed a series of dikes and levees which brought year-long standing water to thousands of formerly arable acres. Many people allege that money for projects intended to alleviate the water logging has been stolen by corrupt politicians.

¶13. In Khulna, the biggest concern was the environmental and social impact of the shrimp industry. While providing a substantial source of revenue to the region and the country, dedicating former farmland to salt-water shrimp raising is having a huge impact on the future ability to grow anything in that region. There is also some concern that the benefits of the shrimp ponds is not trickling down. In fact, the increasing salinity of the land and streams is having a negative economic impact on village families, who complain that local government is not responsive to their needs.

Indigenous People Struggle for Land Rights

¶14. Indigenous people in the southwest face the same issues of land grabbing that they face elsewhere in the country. In the Kashipur village in Satkhira district, Munda villagers spoke about recent violence over ownership of a small plot (less than an acre) next to their homes. The Munda are a relatively small indigenous group in Bangladesh who practice a Hindu-influenced form of animism. Like many indigenous people, they do not have clear title to the land which they have traditionally occupied, making them vulnerable to displacement. Their village was once surrounded by small farms; it now sits like an island in the middle of many shrimp ponds, inaccessible by cars or rickshaws. When an NGO recently tried to erect a sanitary latrine on this piece of land, a relative of the local JI MP claimed he bought that tract in 1994; the seller's job, not coincidentally, was listed as "deed writer." Several villagers were injured by thugs hired to drive off the NGO and intimidate the village residents. Cases have been filed at the local police station, and an investigation is under way.

¶15. The village is divided in its attitude toward the local MP. Leaders believe the JI MP was not involved in the

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attempted land grab, and claim he has been honest and fair in dealing with the villagers. This is similar to the level and type of support seen for Golam Parwar, a Jamaat Islami MP whose constituency is almost 40% Hindu (see reftel). About half of the Kashipur village families, however, support the former AL MP, going so far as to drop their own Munda last name and adopt his Hindu name.

Comment

¶16. Significantly, in what has been a violent section of the country for 30 years, only a handful of NGO leaders are concerned about attacks against minorities. Even previous targets of attacks seem satisfied that relations between groups are healthy and the BNP has sufficiently restored law and order. Because elections are still many months away, most villagers seemed more concerned about everyday issues than the elections. One priest told us that we should expect to see fears rise as the elections near, and post will continue to monitor this area. NGO's are prepared to post observers before, during and after the elections.

¶17. It is also unusual to hear local villagers discussing the importance of environmental issues. The destruction of farmland in this heavily populated country is a matter of

survival for these villagers, and the BNP needs to address these issues if they expect to retain these seats, as well as averting any further ecological destruction.

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